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## SOME NOTES ON COLERIDGE-TAYLOR

By HERBERT ANTCLIFFE

IT is related that Jules Massenet, on reading a copy of Coleridge-Taylor's *Song of Hiawatha*, and without knowing who the composer was, remarked, "That was written by a man of colour." Of course, "the coloured races" are as varied as the white races, or more so; but Coleridge-Taylor was representative in many respects of the vast negro race to which he more than half belonged, as well as the great champion in the opposition to their exclusion on mere grounds of colour from artistic circles. His birth and residence in London, doubtless helped in this latter matter. In spite of the pride which he feels in the history of his country, in spite of a certain arrogance arising from this, and in spite of a foolish despite of all that is outside his insular conventions, there is no one so free from actual racial prejudice as the average Englishman. He will not only welcome to his country men of every race and colour, but will help them whole-heartedly even in competition against himself. Not only legally, but socially and in business, every man in England has the same chance, whatever his colour or race. This is not to say there is no natural feeling of distrust and wonder at the achievements of those who are of a different race. Even in the great metropolis of this Empire of mixed races, in London itself, the black man does not always love the white, nor the white man trust the yellow. The difficulties he had to overcome because of his colour, therefore, were just sufficient to make the achievements of Coleridge-Taylor a racial triumph, while they were not so nearly insuperable as they might have been where the race feeling was keener or more bitter. Had he on the other hand appeared among men of his own race and colour it is possible, even probable, that what he did in the way of art would have been largely ignored and forgotten, nor would he have had the same opportunity of developing his talent and its products. From every point of view London would seem to be the place most propitious for the appearance of such an artist, and it was here that he was born and where his first and greatest triumph as a composer was accomplished.

For those who regard signs and dates as of significance it is perhaps not without interest to note that he was born on 10th



Coleridge-Taylor

August, 1875, just six months after the death of Sterndale Bennett, the greatest British composer of the nineteenth century. His father was a full-blooded negro from Sierra Leone, a medical man of considerable ability but little mental or moral stamina, and the boy was brought up by others. His general education, except so far as he acquired it from his own reading and observation, was that of the better type of working class in England, which, it may be observed, is not entirely unmusical, and was less so forty years ago than now. He was a choir boy, and at fifteen found a patron who placed him in the Royal College of Music, where he studied the violin, and later counterpoint under J. F. Bridge and composition under Stanford. His earliest compositions, written about this time and some of them published a few years later, were church anthems, the interest in which lies in the fact that they were written by a boy of that age.

Under Stanford he made rapid progress with his technic, without losing, in fact rather adding to, his individuality. By 1896 he had completed a Symphony which was played by the College orchestra, and showed already his desire to gain for negro music the recognition he considered was its due. Besides this he exhibited more than might be expected of signs of the knowledge and control of orchestral timbre which was one of his most striking attributes later. Thematically the work is partly original and partly based upon negro tunes. Like most other young composers he found the greatest difficulty in writing an effective Finale, and here the teaching and criticism of his professor proved of great benefit. Alterations were made from time to time in this movement, which, at first a mechanical, uninspired work, became eventually a strong, virile piece of music. It was the slow movement, *A Lament*, which won the most favour at the semi-public performance in the College at the end of the Easter term of 1896. As it stands to-day, it is not unlikely that the finale would be equally popular. One of the most striking features of the orchestration is the rich, but often delicate scoring for the brass instruments, which in his later works was nearly always a notable characteristic.

His *Four Characteristic Waltzes*, written about the same time as the symphony (if not earlier) and which have since seized the popular fancy, have more relation to his other early works, particularly in the orchestration. His constant employment of the device of repeated unison passages varied on each repetition by the use of a different quality of tone was in danger of becoming a mannerism. It escaped this, however, and we find it used with something approaching genius in such a work as his *Ballade in A*

*minor* for orchestra, produced at the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester in 1898. This short work is not only strikingly characteristic of the composer, but is one which every aspiring orchestral composer should know very thoroughly. At the time of its original production it was described as "barbaric," "wild," "uncouth," and by other adjectives which displayed a complete lack of understanding of its qualities, though its popularity was never in doubt. While everybody now admits the incorrectness of these descriptions, the work still remains one that could not have been written by a composer of pure European descent. Its themes (there are two of them) are original and perhaps less noticeably negro in their origin than those of many of his other works; in treatment it belongs to the mind of "a man of colour" as much as any of them. Yet never does it go outside recognised methods in either harmonic, melodic, orchestral or formal structure; which fact makes its indubitable originality all the more remarkable. It was not to the advantage of the work that the composer conducted its first performance, for, enthusiastic and painstaking as he was in this as in everything else, Coleridge-Taylor never became more than a second-rate conductor even of his own works.

More than one writer has suggested that the second theme, because of its broad flowing character, is outside his negro tradition; but so far from this being the case, it falls in with negro music in general by its splendid contrast with the vigorous rhythm of the principal theme. This sense of contrast is the possession of all races, but none has it more fully than have those of tropical Africa.

There probably never has been an orchestral work of such importance, intrinsically and in its relation to the world of music, that has been constructed on so simple a scheme of tonality, theme and orchestration. In its 460 measures it modulates from A minor into the relative major, to the dominant, to C minor, to F major and (for a few bars only) into D flat, i. e., transposed C sharp, major, and to no other key unless it be a momentary transition. As already mentioned it has but two themes, though the first is easily divided, and these two are subjected to little variation and practically no development. Occasionally they are combined or merged one in the other; more often they are repeated with varied orchestration and occasionally with varied harmony, this last consisting chiefly of inversions of the opening harmony, so that the inverted pedal, e. g., becomes an uninverted one. When we analyse the work to discover the qualities which make it so distinctive, we are able to discern only the one supreme and

indefinable one which we call genius. Schubert wrote nothing simpler or more melodious; and neither he nor Weber produced more beautiful and richly balanced tones from the orchestra, while not Haydn nor Mozart was more direct in his structural methods.

This is the work which more than any other strikes the keynote of his style and method as an orchestral writer. It is as distinctive and also as typical as *The Song of Hiawatha*, and no small part of its effectiveness lies in the fact that it is entirely different. In these two works we see the composer's grasp of his media, two separate media demanding and obtaining entirely different treatment. They are the two works which have won a complete recognition by all classes of music lovers, and though some of his lighter orchestral pieces have perhaps been more popular, the *Ballade* stands as the classic example of his orchestral genius. It anticipated his other works in its economy of thematic material, as well as in its characteristic energy and unfailing melody. The many varieties of form and colour which later he could give to a phrase or a figure are suggested in it, while the perfect homogeneity of its feeling was as marked as in the works of his latest and most mature period. Perhaps one little weakness is the recurrence several times of a bridge passage of no particular significance, though in the sweep of the work as a whole this is scarcely noticeable, and does not seriously interfere with the general interest of the work.

This weakness of constructive method quickly disappeared, and in the *Fantasiestück in A major* for Violoncello and Orchestra, a work in variation form, one of the most notable features is the absence of any apparent bridge passages at all. After this work had been played several times during the year 1907, the score, unfortunately, was lost in its wanderings, so that only a brief note written from memory is possible. Its theme is a broadly outlined melody in the composer's favourite *a-b-a* form, announced by the solo instrument, and eminently characteristic of it. Each of the half dozen or so variations remains very faithful to the original theme, though the scheme of tonality is a somewhat diverse one—A major, F major, F sharp minor, A flat major, etc. Although lightly scored so as to keep the solo part prominent against a contrasted background, it works up to a climax that is big in tone as well as in emotion. Its ideas generally, like most of those in Coleridge-Taylor's music, are persuasive rather than peremptory, and its loss after so few performances makes the world poorer of music that possessed a most satisfying charm.

Being himself a violinist of no inconsiderable ability, it is not surprising that much of his most effective music, a Concertstück, a Sonata, *Four African Dances*, two Ballades and many smaller pieces, were written with the violin as the principal instrument. Of these the most important, or at least the most ambitious, is the Violin Concerto in G minor, Op. 80. This was written during his first successful visit to the United States, and was based principally upon negro melodies, of which he had made a large collection. As it was commissioned by Carl Stoeckel and intended to be played by Maud Powell, Coleridge-Taylor not unnaturally endeavoured to meet the ideas of these two, both of whom he recognised as musicians of a high order. One of their suggestions which he accepted was that he should use "Yankee Doodle" as one of the principal themes, which he did by making it the second theme of the finale. Unfortunately neither this tune nor the original first theme of that movement inspired him to any real outburst of music, and the result was a movement that was scrappy and unsatisfactory, though not without some moments of beauty and some fine strong writing for both soloist and orchestra. Less pleased even than were his critics, the composer decided to lay the work aside, and had not better counsels prevailed it would probably have shared the fate of other unsatisfactory works and been consigned to the fire. On his return to England he decided to rewrite the work entirely, and in doing so discarded both themes and treatment of the last movement and used only short fragments from the second one. What the cause of dissatisfaction with this second movement was, it is difficult to see, for it is a piece of real beauty, based on the negro melody, "Many thousand gone." It is now published as a separate work. Possibly it was the same general feeling of dissatisfaction with what was done and of the great potentiality of what was to come which made him from time to time offer huge holocausts of manuscripts on the altar of efficiency and good work.

In the new version the first movement, in which he retained the principal theme as well as many of the details of the original work, and the finale, stand out for their nobility, as well as for the effectiveness from the technical point of view of their rhythm and orchestration. We find in the themes, just as in those of some of his earlier works, melodic cadences which theoretically are feminine, but which in effect are not only virile but masculine. Very striking in this respect is the opening theme, which forms a strong contrast to its companion theme, the latter being actually and clearly feminine in its close, or the curiously piquant second



A page from the original manuscript of Coleridge-Taylor's Violin Concerto.



theme of the finale. Although written some years later, there is a certain affinity between two of these and the principal melody of the orchestral *Ballade*, while it will be remembered that the same feminine cadence occurs again and again in the thematic material of *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Another work commissioned by Stoeckel was an orchestral piece, for which he supplied the *Bamboula*, an early work rewritten with the experience of later years, and particularly with his increased knowledge of negro music. It gets its name as well as its principal motive from the dance melody well known from its association with the negroes of the West Indies. What have probably done more to cause its popularity than anything else are the energy of its movement and the piquancy of its orchestration, for it carries the hearer along in a swirl of sound that never fails of sensation. Its cleverness is not so obvious as is that of some of his other works. Here he laid himself out to write a work which should be simple and popular, and achieved these characteristics in a marked degree. Not that it is in any way unworthy of its composer or lacking in real musicianship; but it is not a work which strikes the hearer as anything more than an able and interesting little number which most qualified musicians with a bent to constructive work could have written. Unlike many popular numbers by composers of higher powers, it helps towards popularity without detracting at all from his serious reputation. It preserves the original movement of the native dance, but also contrasts, and by doing so somewhat accentuates, its character with a theme that is more in keeping with conventional musical ideas, although even the contrasting theme is based on that with which it is contrasted. In this matter it bears a close resemblance to the *Ballade*.

Several times and at different periods Coleridge-Taylor tried his hand at opera writing, and with widely differing results. His first attempt was a little romantic opera, *The Dream Lovers*, which is notable for its delightful feeling and suave melody rather than for its dramatic qualities or those of a deeper musical character. Later he wrote a cantata-operetta, *The Gitanos*, for female voices, which also is more musical than dramatic. *Endymion's Dream*, a short one-act work to a libretto based on the work of John Keats, is essentially Wagnerian in its methods. It has been published as a cantata and in that form is not unpopular. It has only occasionally been played as an opera, the Keats Centenary forming the occasion for several such performances. Without being equal to the best of his other work, it is full of passion and feeling, and its scoring is in a manner new to the composer, if not unique in all

his work. In it he seems to be preparing the way for the style which fully appeared for the first and last time in *A Tale of Old Japan*. Not so the longer and more ambitious three-act work, *Thelma*, upon which he himself built great hopes.

If we judged his dramatic capabilities by this work we should be bound to place them in a low category. Its style seems to be modelled on that of the Italian-Irish composers of the nineteenth century, of Balfe and Wallace, and, to a less extent, of Bishop and Nicolai. There are nevertheless rhythms and instrumental combinations characteristic of Coleridge-Taylor himself, and there is, particularly in the last Act, some decidedly picturesque writing. The practised hand of the musician appears on every page of the score, but not the hand of the opera composer. This is curious in view of his experience, not yet exhausted at the time he wrote the opera but already very considerable, as a writer of incidental music for spoken plays. *Thelma*, however, is quite different from anything else he wrote, and with a more concise and dramatic libretto, allowing of strict condensation in the music, might have been made quite effective.

Some of the music was subsequently utilised for other purposes, chiefly in the incidental music to *Othello*, which is probably the most popular of his "Konversations-Musik," for which purpose it is used almost exclusively. Of incidental music for the stage he wrote much, chiefly for Beerbohm Tree, and nearly all was of a brilliant and sometimes gorgeous type. Besides *Othello* he wrote music for at least five dramas, *Faust*, *Nero*, *Herod*, *Ulysses* and *The Forest of Wild Thyme*, besides a ballet on *Hiawatha*. Most characteristic was that for *Nero*, and the least so—why it should be so is difficult to understand—that of the ballet. It is curious that this should be so, for, as a rule, interesting as this stage-music is, and full of melodies of an obvious but virile character, as a whole it falls nearer the mark of Kapellmeister music than anything else he has written. Still more striking is the comparative failure (I say comparative because it is good music and has met with a large amount of popular success) of the *Hiawatha* ballet, for some of his lighter music, the *Petite Suite de Concert*, for instance, possesses just the characteristics required for a good ballet. Some of the music published as pianoforte music, too, has these same qualities, and not improbably was intended for something of the kind. All his orchestral music was written first in close score, and generally without any indications of his wishes with regard to the orchestra. It seems likely, therefore, that in the last busy years of his life, when his works in general seemed likely

to be popular, he would write a number of pieces that would come in useful as occasion should demand. These he would leave in their original condition until he knew the resources available for the occasion of their utilisation.

His *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* (Op. 63), however, are in no wise occasional music, and these he seems to have written with very precise ideas and indications as to their orchestration, and to have scored with the utmost care and imagination, attaining something of the classical spirit in their construction. When one considers the strange neglect of Coleridge-Taylor's serious orchestral works, the most striking instance is this, the biggest in almost every way of them all, which will compare favourably with similar works in the repertory of many leading orchestras, and might with advantage be on the table of every student of orchestration and musical development. Like many other works in the same form it is based on a theme that is not only very brief (eight bars repeated), but quite commonplace in character. Nevertheless, interest is aroused at once by the piquant scoring: melody on three trombones, *pp*, with accompaniment for strings, *tremolando*, timpani and gran cassa, to which flutes in short shakes are added on the repetition. Here again we notice the cross accent, the composer's native fondness for which has already been commented upon. This is in Common time and in E minor. A new melodic interest arises in the first variation, in triple time, with the theme, played by Oboe and Clarinet, extended by decorative *arpeggi* and varied by grace notes, to which is added a light but full and characteristic accompaniment in A minor for strings and harp. A rapid waltz-like movement, scored for strings, wood-wind, triangle and occasionally horns, follows. A casual reading of the score of this variation will lead to the criticism that it is commonplace and such as might easily be written by any ordinarily accomplished musician. There is in it, however, something very convincing; the onrush of the rhythm, the downward swoop of the melody in the first part and its subsequent soar to a climax, its fidelity in primary emotion to the theme and its perfect fusion of the tones of wind, strings and percussion, all make it a supreme example of its kind, even though that kind be a common one. Almost as noteworthy is the succeeding *appassionato* movement in duple time, a continuous melody for strings, supported by flutes, oboes and clarinets alternately, with sustained chromatic harmony on horns and bass trombone. After this the Waltz variation is repeated. Here we see again the composer's fondness, which was at times almost an obsession, for the simple ternary form. It is

used later in this work, though not so strictly, when he repeats the eighth variation, a beautiful plaintive little tune in alternate 6-8 and 3-4 rhythm, after a somewhat more vigorous one accompanied by a curious countermelody of triplets and quadroleths.

One is strongly tempted to describe at length each of the fourteen variations, for there is not one but has some characteristic, some figure of melody, some tonal quality, some device of metamorphosis, that is distinctive. It is not necessary to ask of such a work if it is a great emotional one or not. If it develops the theme on which it is based in such a manner as to make the interest cumulative, if it displays striking ingenuity in construction and invention while yet each figure and each development is based on the theme or on some part of it, and if it works towards a musical and stirring climax of tone, it carries out what is its primary and essential object. Coleridge-Taylor's *Symphonic Variations* does this, certainly, and I think it does considerably more. Even the *Ballade in A minor* and *The Song of Hiawatha* are not so thoroughly representative of the man, for the former is an early work in which his full personality and technique as an orchestral writer were not developed, while the latter is more of a magnificent interpretation of Longfellow's poem than an expression of his own nature. In the Variations we get a full exposition of the man's musical nature at its highest development, with all the variety of thought and all the vigour and tenderness of his manhood at work. We witness the piquant individuality of the man, his geniality and sentimental but virile tenderness, his racial fondness for strong rhythmic accents and his natural conservatism and regard for classic tradition. For these reasons, and particularly for its happy and rare combination of individuality and classicism, it is a work which properly presented should be as popular in its way as any of his smaller and lighter works. Certainly it might with advantage take the place of several works which appear in orchestral programmes *ad nauseam*, and with a fair certainty of being acceptable to all classes of hearers.

One need not, in considering the characteristics of Coleridge-Taylor's orchestral works, devote any very deep consideration to such of them as *Toussaint l'Ouverture*, the *Hemo Dance*, or the march, *Ethiopia Saluting the Colours*. They are works which are always interesting and enjoyable, both to performers and hearers, but they follow too closely the line of his more striking works of the same *genre* to provoke more than a passing reference. Of the first it may be said that, though not programme music in any serious way, it was probably his nearest approach to that

fascinating line of artistic activity. It was written in honour of the coloured soldier of that name and with his greatest exploit in mind, but there is no serious attempt to describe that or the emotions which caused it. Its object is rather that of a "Huldigungs-marsch" than a representative piece. The titles of the Four Visions in the *Faust* music, "Helen," "Cleopatra," "Messalina" and "Margaret," also suggest a programmatic idea which is partly carried out; but these, it must be remembered, are incidental to the drama, and such suggestions must necessarily, in order to avoid any clashing between stage and orchestra, be tentative and indefinite. Somewhat disappointing is this lack of attempt to write any serious descriptive or programmatic music for the orchestra, for his powers in this direction were undeniably great, and would have developed with exercise, particularly as he was deeply interested in all kinds of literature. These powers he exerted in some of his choral works with almost magical effect, not only when voices and instruments are combined, but also when the latter are heard alone.

After his great success with *The Song of Hiawatha* he never reached quite the same height of inspiration as a choral writer, possibly owing to the difficulty of finding poems suited to his individual genius. His successes, too, were on quite different lines and different subjects, and were more dependent upon the combination of chorus and orchestra than upon the pure choral writing. Even his part-songs, which are all good, but are none of them comparable with these greater works, are dependent to a large extent upon their accompaniments. Of his later choral works the most notable is *Meg Blane*, a short work for mezzo-soprano solo, chorus and orchestra. Here he gets all the rugged but tense emotion of Robert Buchanan's poem of the sea, as well as its graphic suggestions of the storm and the little boat struggling against the powers of nature. In the solo part there is a degree of pathos and expression that is nothing short of tremendous. But chorus and orchestra share in the picturesque side of the work, and the latter has the larger share. The subtitle of the work is "A Rhapsody of the Sea," and while it is rhapsodic the work is also one of the most dramatic in the whole literature of music. All the terror, the anxiety, the activity, the awe, the grandeur of the scene are represented, yet there is also all the exhilaration of the natural circumstances. In no other work has he written more finely for the orchestra, while the vocal parts fill in the narrative in an emotional manner that is more than adequate. *Kubla Khan*, for a similar group of voices and orchestra, is at the opposite pole

of emotion and activity, but affords scope for the composer's great descriptive powers, which were aroused by the actual setting of the words rather than by the abstract inspiration of the poems which pleased him.

Something of the same inspiration and technique obtain in *A Tale of Old Japan*, a work which came late in his career, but which branched out so successfully in an entirely new direction as to arouse hopes, finally crushed by the composer's early death, that he might even evolve a new style of choral ballad. He had already shown a degree of delicate lyricism in the *Bon Bon Suite*, a series of six short movements to words by Thomas Moore. In *A Tale of Old Japan* it was developed and refined to a high degree, and yet used as the expression—a perfect expression, though beyond the comprehension of some of our too realist modern musicians—of deep emotion. Yet it is an emotion that becomes tense only occasionally, and as a whole the work is one of lightness and charm, which is its greatest triumph!

Some of his critics have objected to the work of Coleridge-Taylor on the ground that it is marred, if not ruined, by his strict adherence to classical forms. There can be no question that this has militated against its ready acceptance by a large body of conductors and performers who have been satiated by the many inferior and lifeless works in these forms which it falls to their lot to examine every year. Possibly—for he was of a somewhat timorous nature, even in his music—had he launched out more freely in matters of form and expression, Coleridge-Taylor would have been a more powerful writer than he actually was. It cannot be denied, however, that while he lacked the kind of initiative which invents new forms as did that of Liszt, Chopin, Debussy and some of their successors, or reconstitutes the old ones as that of Richard Strauss, Vincent d'Indy, Edward Elgar or Ildebrando Pizzetti (particularly in his great Sonata for violin and pianoforte), he has, like his elder contemporary Alexander Scriabin, adapted very thoroughly to his own purposes the classical forms.

One point at which, like Beethoven, he has always taken his own course without regard for precedent, is at the cadence, and here also he never repeated himself. A twelve-bar tonic pedal seems to have been a favourite device, but how varied he could make it is seen by comparing the close of the *Ballade in A minor* with that of a posthumous *Interlude for Organ*, with its full chords descending in irregular chromatic sequence to the Common Chord. That of *Meg Blane* is also on a tonic pedal, but with tonic chords only, major ninth, major sixth, minor sixth (first inversion of the

common chord of the flattened sixth) and tonic common chord. In *A Tale of Old Japan* the tonic pedal is inverted, with a descending chromatic bass, which rests and returns on the last three chords before the tonic triad, the bass notes of this return being the flattened sixth and flattened seventh. Yet in all of these is felt a perfect sense of strong grip and no loss of the satisfaction which a contrast of chord or tonality would presuppose. In *Hiawatha* he repeats a cadence that so far as the bass is concerned (key of E major descending, E, B, C sharp, C natural, B, C sharp, B, A sharp, A natural, E) might satisfy the schoolmen. When one analyses the harmony of these few closing bars, however, one discovers a disregard of convention that was working out by evolutionary methods and quite independently, and also without the scientific and arbitrary theories of Debussy and Scriabin, some of the chords and scales the use of which made the followers of the French and Russian composers hail them as great discoverers.

Coleridge-Taylor was a fluent writer and did not always wait for inspiration. In fact, he worked in almost too businesslike a way, keeping regular hours at his work, and not allowing concert engagements, of which he had a considerable number, to interfere with his daily quota of composition. In some matters a keen self-critic, he destroyed at regular intervals whatever manuscripts he considered not worthy of his talent. By this means it is not unlikely he sacrificed some works which posterity, or even his own further consideration, might have approved, if not placed in a high category. Unfortunately it did not comprise some which years of knowledge fail to make satisfactory: *The Atonement*, *The Blind Girl of Castel-Cuillé*, and some of his songs, for instance. Yet the works we have considered, and the fact that of the others not one lacks some inspired passages and all are written with keen musical and poetic feeling, make it appear strange that his reputation is based on so little of what he wrote. His orchestral works certainly ought, as a whole, to be as well known as those for voices, and the *Symphonic Variations*, the *Ballade in A minor*, the *Violin Concerto*, and possibly some of the chamber works for violin and pianoforte, to be placed in the repertory of instrumentalists on a level with *The Song of Hiawatha* and *A Tale of Old Japan* in the repertory of choral societies. Some of his work suffered, as did some of that of Schubert, of Mendelssohn, of Franck, even of Beethoven, and still more of Bach, from his too great fecundity; but none of it suffered, as does some of that of most facile and versatile writers, from prolixity or carelessness of production. He was conservative because his work was rooted deeply in the soil

of classic tradition, and his thoughts were sufficiently *selbstständig*, sufficiently self-contained and independent, to dispense with the invention of new methods of expression. He was, in fact, one of the most original thinkers among musicians of his generation, which enabled him to avoid any conscious or shallow attempt at originality for its own sake.